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Language Policy and Education in Viet Nam

LANGUAGE POLICY AND EDUCATION IN VIỆT NAM DURING THE FRENCH COLONIAL PERIOD¹

Erica Ness

In order to understand the linguistic situation at the time of French penetration into Việt Nam, it is necessary to look briefly at the history of language use there. There were, at this time, several languages used by the Việt, the dominant and most numerous ethnic group in the country. There was the vernacular Vietnamese language, spoken by everyone, and Chinese, which was mastered only by a small part of the population who possessed wealth and rank. Chinese was also the language of the emperor and his officials at the imperial court. Vernacular Vietnamese had a written form which used phonetic Chinese characters called Chử Nôm to represent the sounds of the Vietnamese language; however, this form of writing was mostly limited to works of literature such as poetry. A written form of the vernacular using the romanized alphabet and Portuguese accent marks to represent the six tones² had been developed by European missionaries in the seventeenth century in order to better communicate the Catholic faith to the natives. This form came to be known as Quốc Ngữ or "national language" and was used exclusively by the missionaries and their converts.

In addition to the Việt people, there existed over sixty minority groups in all of Việt Nam, most possessing their own languages and living apart from the Việt. These languages have been grouped into two language families, the Sino-Tibetan and the Austro-Asiatic (Nguyễn, 1967: 5). Only a few of these languages had a written form.

The French ruled Việt Nam from 1861 to 1945. When their rule began in 1861, they possessed only the southernmost portion of the country, which they called Cochinchina. The central and northern portions remained under the jurisdiction of the Vietnamese imperial court in the city of Huế until their conquest by the French in 1885. Originally hoping to keep the same administrative structure as before, where Vietnamese officials would keep their positions but act under French orders, the plans of the French were disrupted when these officials fled to central and northern Việt Nam.³ Faced with running the administration by themselves, the French conquerors found that their most immediate problem was communication with the native population.

The French, finding the learning of Chinese characters for written communication with the indigenous people too tedious and time-consuming, turned for interpreters to the Collège d'Adran, a school which trained Vietnamese to read and write in romanized Vietnamese and Latin for religious purposes. The French also founded the Collège des Interprètes to train Vietnamese as interpreters and to teach romanized Vietnamese to French personnel. Admiral Bonard, the first governor of Cochinchina in 1861, also added courses for the training of interpreters to the curriculum of Vietnamese schools.

Although the conquerors' first educational efforts concentrated on teaching Quốc Ngữ, the aim of French language policy in Việt Nam was to produce an elite class of French-speaking Vietnamese who would help the conquerors run the administration. In accordance with this aim, French was to be introduced into the schools, preferably as soon as possible. The way this policy was implemented varied with individual French administrators and with a realization of the need to proceed gradually due to the linguistic situation in the country.

It was because of this need to proceed gradually that the French, moving beyond the training of interpreters, first promoted the teaching of Quốc Ngữ in the schools instead of the French language alone. In 1864 Governor de la Grandière established a small number of primary schools⁴ in the main centers of the colony of Cochinchina; there

children learned to read and write in Quốc Ngữ as well as learning arithmetic and geometry. The French-trained interpreters were the first teachers in these schools. De la Grandiere also established a small number of French language schools staffed by priests, as well as a French newspaper, Courrier de Saigon, to promote the French language.

Quốc Ngữ writing began to be promoted by the French through the publishing of journals written in that language. First published in 1865, Gia Định Báo was the first Quốc Ngữ journal and was controlled by the French. Its official purpose was to disseminate news. The romanized writing was also promoted through publications by Vietnamese such as Trương Vĩnh Ký. A talented polyglot hoping to preserve some of the Chinese and Chữ Nôm classics as well as present new knowledge, he published dictionaries, grammars and translations in the romanized alphabet, and he also helped to popularize the term "Quốc Ngữ". In addition, he encouraged others to write more in Quoc Ngu.

Truong Vinh Ky was ahead of his time in believing that Quoc Ngu was capable of expressing more than the most rudimentary ideas. The Vietnamese language was generally looked down upon by both the French and by many Vietnamese themselves. For writing, one used Chinese or sometimes Chu Nom; Vietnamese was only a vehicle for everyday speech. To even consider it worthy of expressing complex ideas was very controversial at that time.

Etienne Aymonier, Director of the Ecole Coloniale in Paris, an elite training school for colonial administrators, called the Vietnamese language "a Chinese patois" and felt, along with many of his contemporaries, that as a monosyllabic language, Vietnamese was inferior to a more "civilized" language like French (Aymonier 1890: 7, 25, 45). Some Frenchmen held the view that the language would eventually advance in stages from monosyllabic to agglutinative to inflectional. But since it was not yet an inflectional language, nothing more than the most simplistic ideas could be expressed in it (Aymonier 1890: 9, 54). Paulin Vial, Director of the Governor's Cabinet of Cochinchina, expressed a minority viewpoint when he said that Vietnamese was capable of expressing all the ideas

and actions of native life. He pointed out that if Quốc Ngữ were to spread, good literature had to be written in it (DeFrancis 1977: 142-143):

When some men of talent have made use of it to write
some interesting books within the reach of our new subjects,
it will very quickly replace Chinese literature.

Việt Nam had been under Chinese domination for nearly 1,000 years before the French arrived. The southern portion of the country, being the last portion to be conquered by the Chinese, was least influenced by Chinese language and culture. However, the French, desiring to lessen Chinese influence, terminated in 1865 the ancient system borrowed from Việt Nam's northern neighbor of giving civil service examinations in Chinese. Successful candidates in these examinations had been placed in various administrative positions in the country, the importance of the position being related to the score on the Chinese exam. Now the French filled the positions with their own candidates who often lacked proper rank or qualification, thereby lessening the incentive to learn Chinese. The examinations, however, continued to flourish in the central and northern regions of Việt Nam not yet under French control.

A resistance movement arose among the Vietnamese with the aim of ousting the French. The language of this movement was at first Chinese, but increasingly, the resistance leaders adopted Chữ Nôm, the written form of vernacular Vietnamese, because, if read aloud, it could be understood by the masses, whereas most people could not understand Chinese. Resistance literature in Chữ Nôm was circulated widely among the people to gain popular support for the cause. Due to the resistance movement, the use of this form of writing reached new heights during the first years of the French rule.

This popular anti-French literature of the resistance was written in the form of poetry found in traditional Chữ Nôm literature. Posters were put up in public places with a note asking people to copy them. The French, knowing that Chữ Nôm was largely restricted to literature on less serious subjects, did not bother to suppress it as they had done to Chinese.

In 1885 the central and northern areas of Việt Nam, called by the French Annam and Tonkin, respectively, came under French control. Paul Bert, the Minister of Education, attempted to pursue a different policy than that previously undertaken in Cochinchina with regard to the Chinese-speaking elite class of Vietnamese scholars. Cochinchina had only occasional relations with China, but Tonkin had frequent commercial relations with that country, so knowledge of characters there was necessary for the administration and the people. Rather than attempt to eliminate Chinese characters, Bert tried to win over many of the elite as collaborators with the French by promoting Chinese. One of the steps he took to gain *litterati* support was the establishment of The Tonkin Academy at Hanoi in 1886, made up of Vietnamese scholars dedicated to preserving the Chinese classics and translating European books into Vietnamese. It was said to have greatly impressed the scholars (Bourde 1889).

Another point in Paul Bert's policy of encouraging Chinese was the teaching of Chinese characters in the schools. In the case of French-controlled schools where characters had not been taught before, new teachers were brought in to teach them. The fact that his true aim was not the promotion of characters is revealed in the following statement (DeFrancis 1977: 129):

Without doubt the replacement of Chinese or Annamite characters by latin characters, by Quốc Ngữ, is desirable from the point of view of our influence, without doubt, the diffusion of French would offer great conveniences. But the instinctive repugnance of the natives made difficult this double progress. To obtain it we would be forced to proceed with prudence, dissimulating our aims, and to act by slow but continuous infiltration.

In the traditional Vietnamese schools where no French was yet taught, Bert created a policy of introducing French by converting the students through their teachers. This was done by teaching Quốc Ngữ to the teachers first, after having mastered the romanized alphabet, the teachers more easily learned the French language, which they then passed on to their students. Bonuses were offered as incentives for each student who successfully

passed a French examination. The Quoc Ngu French courses for teachers had extraordinary success. In less than a month, over 120 student teachers enrolled in such courses in Hanoi alone. Within a year, hundreds of schools were set up. However, Bert's language policy ended shortly after it was put into effect with Bert's death from dysentery. Two years after their inception, only a few of the hundreds of schools were left, and the Tonkin Academy was ended as well.

In Cochinchina, where the scholar class was weaker and characters were less important, the stand against characters continued. However, characters were still used in the South, as shown by a report in 1887 which stated that governmental decisions and announcements had to be circulated in both Chinese and Qu⁴ôc Ng[~] (DeFrancis 1977: 124). In 1888 it was reported that parents still sent their children to the traditional Vietnamese schools which taught and used Chinese characters after their children left the French schools. There is evidence that these schools continued to attract students even in the first decade of the twentieth century (DeFrancis 1977: 124).

In the meeting of the Colonial Congress in 1890, promotion of French in Vi⁴et Nam was one of the issues. Aymonier won unanimous approval for the following resolutions:

1. Official instruction in French Cochinchina will be based to the fullest extent possible on the study of the French language: the budgetary resources of the colony will be used principally for the diffusion of this language.
2. In all of French Indochina the government will examine means of encouraging the study of French and of making the study of this language easily and inexpensively available to the native populations.

Emphasis was put on Cochinchina because Aymonier found that French had been more widely distributed in Tonkin than in Cochinchina. He shared the view with many colonials that Qu⁴ôc Ng[~] had been too widely disseminated in Cochinchina and had taken root more than French. Aymonier supported only the direct teaching of French. Paul Bourde, correspondent for Le Temps, attacked Aymonier's views, pointing out the traditional Vietnamese dedication to learning, and stating that the Vietnamese could never

be expected to completely renounce their language in favor of French (Bourde 1889). Aymonier rejected Quốc Ngữ as having any value for native speakers of Vietnamese learning French, but he felt that it might be of use to Europeans for communication with the Vietnamese people

What type of French to teach was a point of disagreement for French colonials. Aymonier believed that it was necessary to teach standard French only at the secondary level. At the beginning levels a special simplified French was sufficient. This simplified French was made up of words expressing very basic ideas; it contained no irregular spellings, only a few conjugations, some verbs replaced with nouns and few synonyms. Aymonier had found that a similar type of simplified French was being proposed for schools in Tunisia and Senegal, and he suggested the following for Indochina's schools (Aymonier 1890: 37):

At the base, in the communes, Simplified French; higher up, in the schools of the main district towns, Classical French; higher still, some professional schools and some colleges like those already in existence in Saigon, but accepting only a small elite. At present, we have more or less the two upper levels, but the base is totally lacking; it is replaced by the Quốc Ngữ of the cantonal schools and our teaching of the French language is not aimed at taking in the masses.

The idea of adopting a simplified form of French had few advocates. Roucoules, an opponent of Aymonier's, denounced it and referred to it as "français sabir"⁵ (DeFrancis 1977: 135-136). The teaching of standard French was generally accepted as the goal of the educational system in Việt Nam. However, the issues of whether to teach only French or to begin with Quốc Ngữ, and when and at what rate to introduce French were never resolved throughout the entire French colonial period. In the schools there was no uniform practice. According to Roucoules (DeFrancis 1977: 139), the most common practice was to begin with Quốc Ngữ, but a transition to French was to be made soon thereafter. However, in actual practice, the timing of the transition often depended on the availability of French teachers. According to Lahille (DeFrancis 1977: 140), statistics for the years 1885

and 1890 showed that out of 30,000 children enrolled in public schools, 27,000 were instructed in Quốc Ngữ and only 3,000 in French. The quality of these French teachers was often very poor, as indicated by Francisque Vial, an educational writer. On his visits to many primary schools teaching in French he frequently could not understand a word of what the teacher or students were saying and "thought naively, that they were expressing themselves in Annamite or Cambodian" (DeFrancis 1977: 218). Roucoules complained that because most French teachers from France did not know Vietnamese, communication in the classroom was rendered very difficult, if not impossible (DeFrancis 1977: 137).

While some believed that Quốc Ngữ should be suppressed, others felt that it should be modified, particularly in its orthography. Some, like Landes (DeFrancis 1977: 149-150), complained that it followed Portuguese orthography rather than French, and proposed a few minor changes. Aymonier (DeFrancis 1977: 150) felt that three separate transcriptions should be made for the three geographical regions of Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin, reflecting dialect differences. One problem was the lack of an official or "standard" orthography; for example, "quốc" (country) was sometimes spelled "cuốc". At the meeting of the Congress of Orientalists in 1902 a commission was set up to look into reform of Quốc Ngữ. Many scholars attended the debates for and against reform. But after the discussions ended, nothing was done.

One problem with Quốc Ngữ that many people complained of was the lack of a standard spelling. This was blamed by some on mispronunciation of certain vowels and consonants by people in the different regions of Việt Nam. One author, stating that the problem of "defective pronunciation" was due to the various styles of speech in different parts of the country, suggested that the only way to achieve one orthography was to teach children how to spell correctly. However, he did not have much confidence that this would ever be achieved (DeFrancis 1977: 210).

New vocabulary was brought into the language through various writers who wrote of new how terminology should be borrowed into Vietnamese. One writer (DeFrancis 1977: 211) felt that new words could be borrowed from Chinese rather than French, because borrowing from another monosyllabic language would be better than borrowing from a polysyllabic language. Sometimes words took on a very strange pronunciation in cases where they were first borrowed into a dialect of Chinese from French, then borrowed into Vietnamese and pronounced according to Vietnamese phonological habits. In this way, "Gladstone" became "Cách-lan-tử-đôn" and "Rousseau" became "Lữ-thoa" (DeFrancis 1977: 211).

As an incentive for learning French, a decree was issued in May of 1881 stating that French citizenship was to be given only to those who demonstrated competence in the language and acceptance of the culture:

The Annamite native born and domiciled in Cochinchina is French; the native population has accepted French domination; hence it must begin to study our language and to adopt our customs; we cannot give the rights of citizens to persons incapable of understanding our civilization.

However, in actuality many Vietnamese resisted the French language as part of alien rule, and as of 1906 only 254 Vietnamese in Cochinchina had become French citizens (DeFrancis 1977: 141).

In contrast to Bert's policy of supporting Chinese, Aymonier and Puginier, the latter being head of the Catholic Missions in northern Việt Nam, both felt that the Chinese influence on Việt Nam must be lessened by opposing Chinese characters. The French, however, greatly exaggerated the extent of the influence that China had on the Vietnamese, who had never given up their fight to be free of Chinese domination. The Chinese influence, moreover, was much weaker among the masses than among the small elite class (DeFrancis 1977: 142).

Unlike the early leaders of the resistance movement who looked down on Quốc Ngữ and used Chinese and especially Chữ Nôm for their literature, a new generation of

Vietnamese resistance leaders arose in the early 1900's who saw advantages in employing Quốc Ngữ in the publication of anti-French propaganda. Some, like Phan Bội Châu, actively promoted this form of writing. In 1907 Phan wrote an essay calling for the introduction of Quốc Ngữ into the Vietnamese educational system. Some other resistance supporters who were promoters of Quốc Ngữ were Gilbert Chiếu, who established the Quốc Ngữ newspaper Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn and also became editor of a previously established Quốc Ngữ paper, and Nguyễn An Khương, who translated Chinese novels into romanized Vietnamese.

In 1907 Phan Bội Châu set up a new school in Hanoi, the Đông Kinh Free School, which was revolutionary in many ways. Greatly impressed by the victory of an Asian country like Japan over the western power of Russia in 1905, he became convinced that only rapid modernization could help Việt Nam oust the French and transform the country into a nation of western character. He believed that mass education, ignored by the French, was essential for such a modernization to take place and that the medium of education should be Quốc Ngữ.

The school set many precedents, such as allowing boys and girls to learn together in the same classroom, using native Vietnamese teachers to teach modern subjects such as the sciences, having several women teachers on the staff, and adopting Quốc Ngữ as the basic language of instruction. Free to the public, the school soon had more students than it could handle, most from Hanoi and the surrounding suburbs, and it rapidly gained a greater reputation than the French-sponsored schools (Vella 1973: 36)

The scholars at the Đông Kinh Free School were determined to eliminate Chinese characters and replace them with Quốc Ngữ. Much literature was printed in Quốc Ngữ at the school and distributed free to the students or sold to book stores without profit. More revolutionary materials were circulated secretly. Works by French authors such as Rousseau and Montesquieu were smuggled in from China and Japan and translated at the

school. In this way many new terms such as "economy," "revolution" and "progress" entered the Vietnamese language (Vella 1973: 51-52).

Less than a year after its inception, the *Đông Kinh Free School* was closed by the French, who suspected that it was a center of rebellion. Yet the influence that the school had in this short time was amazing. Other free private schools sprang up in almost every province in Tonkin and several in Annam. Besides spawning other private schools, the movement was largely responsible for a linguistic trend toward greater acceptance of romanized script. Evidence of the school's influence on *Quốc Ngữ* is seen in the fact that several pocket-size novels in *Quốc Ngữ* published by the school from 1910 to 1910 managed to become best sellers.

Even the French colonialists were influenced by the *Đông Kinh Free School*. In 1907 when setting up a new school in Hanoi, no doubt to compete with *Đông Kinh*, the French borrowed the *Đông Kinh* scholars' idea of grouping students by ability rather than by age. And when three of the teachers from the *Đông Kinh Free School* asked the Resident Superior of Tonkin to open an institution of higher learning for the Vietnamese elite, the French responded by opening the University of Hanoi in 1907, the first university in Tonkin.⁶ However, since the classes were conducted only in French, students complained of not understanding their teachers, and the university soon closed for lack of students.

An important reform made because of the *Đông Kinh Free School* occurred in 1908, in that year The Council For the Improvement of Education of Indigenous Persons decided to set up a number of schools where children would receive a three-year education. Schools would adopt *Quốc Ngữ* as the language of instruction at the elementary and primary school levels, and French was to be introduced only as a subject in primary school classes. There were about 10,000 students in these schools in 1909 (Vella 1973: 79-80). It has been noted (Vella 1973: 81) that the *Đông Kinh Free School* movement accomplished more

for educational reform in its brief lifetime than the French had accomplished in the preceding forty years.

The French aim of producing an elite French-speaking class of collaborators had some success. In 1903, the French made knowledge of French and Quốc Ngữ obligatory for access to public employment. Although many Vietnamese resisted learning French, by the first decade of the 1900's there arose in Việt Nam a small western-oriented middle class of French-speaking clerks, foremen, nurses, accountants, technical agents in public works and agriculture, and graduates of a few middle-level schools in medicine, engineering and pedagogy.

One writer (Person 1973: 107) notes that a bourgeoisie arose in Cochinchina that spoke only French. Another (DeFrancis 1977: 202) writes that some upper class people adopted French as their only language, sometimes with an entire family renouncing Vietnamese in favor of French as their everyday language; other educated people mixed French and Vietnamese when speaking. In the 1930's Phạm Quỳnh (DeFrancis 1977: 202) noted that because many Vietnamese spent too much time learning French they spoke their own language badly.

As Chinese continued to decline in the first decade of the twentieth century there was a new upsurge in poetry written in that language, generally of a nationalistic nature. Chinese achieved a degree of perfection unknown for eight centuries. Among this poetry were patriotic poems written by scholars of the Đông Kinh Free School. This literature often concerned the need to fight for independence, even to the death.

One colonial administrator who did not support the decline of Chinese was Governor General Beau (1902-1908). Like Paul Bert he wanted to win the support of the scholar elite. To this end, he founded the University of Hanoi. He also felt that it was impractical to abandon characters completely because:

The administration in Cochinchina has discovered that the abandonment of Chinese characters has had the result of causing a good deal of trouble for the people. In many villages one is hard put to find a native capable of deciphering the old administrative documents or the ownership deeds drawn up in characters (DeFrancis 1977: 177).

Beau wanted to make the study of Chinese obligatory even in elementary schools and requested this before an education council, but his requests were rejected. The council felt that characters were no longer used, that there were few qualified teachers, and that making Chinese study obligatory would increase China's influence on the Vietnamese. During World War I the Germans sent anti-French propaganda in Chinese into Việt Nam in the hopes of inciting the Vietnamese to fight against France. As a result French opposition to Chinese at this time was increased. In 1915 the ancient examination system was abolished in Tonkin, and in 1918-1919 in Annam.

In Beau's rather liberal policy toward Chinese, there was an increase in the amount of reformist journalism allowed. This included several journals put out by scholars in the Đông Kinh Free School. After Beau was replaced in 1908 by a more conservative successor, Antoni Klobukowski, freedom of the press was restricted and several of the Đông Kinh School publicists were jailed. The colonial government at this time attempted to increase support for the administration and to counteract the reformers' attempts through the publication of French-backed journals in Quốc Ngữ. Đông Dương Tạp Chí and Trung Bắc Tân Văn were the first two such journals. The fact that the former was written by an outstanding journalist represented an improvement in journalistic efforts in Quốc Ngữ, the majority of Quốc Ngữ periodicals up to that point having been of very poor quality.

Albert Sarraut, Governor General of Indochina from 1911 to 1919 and a former journalist, utilized the press as a weapon to counteract anti-French literature and to put the administrators in a favorable light. During his term he had thirteen journals published in Quốc Ngữ. The most important of these for the spread and perfection of Quốc Ngữ was Nam

Phong Táp Chí, also called Nam Phong (Southern Wind) The editor of this journal, Phạm Quỳnh, wanted to promote Quốc Ngữ as the national written language while supporting French rule in Việt Nam. He showed that romanized Vietnamese could be used for many subjects where only Chinese had previously been used. Originally aimed at supporting the French war effort, Nam Phong soon expanded to the publication of original and translated articles on Eastern and Western philosophy, history and science, problems of language use and the spread of Quốc Ngữ. The translations brought new terms into Vietnamese, and a new prose style was established by the journal. Because Nam Phong was also circulated beyond the Tonkin area, this journal had the effect of standardizing Quoc Ngu and lessening dialectal differences (DeFrancis 1977: 191)

Because of opposition to the imposition of French on students, the language policy was modified in 1924. At this time, an immersion-type French language program taught by native French teachers was common in the schools. That year Vietnamese became the vehicle of instruction for the first three years of school, with French taking over after that. But in practice, it was noted in 1939 (DeFrancis 1977: 201), teaching in French was emphasized wherever possible. Around the time of World War I, village school teachers teaching in Chinese began to retire with no one to take their place. As the French promoted Quốc Ngữ, promotion and participation in society became associated with ability in Quốc Ngữ. However, the French still allowed Chinese to be a requirement for appointment to the mandarinat at the Huế Imperial Court until 1940 (DeFrancis 1977: 204). Several journals were still published in Chinese, but most were translations of Quốc Ngữ journals, and these died off as the number of readers declined. In 1919 a decree was issued to offer the study of Chinese characters as an elective in the traditional schools (DeFrancis 1977: 204). By 1939 Chinese typically was only offered as a subject one hour a week, and only in grades seven through eleven.

It was the development of Quốc Ngữ that contributed more than any other factor to a great literary revival in the first decades of the twentieth century. The first Vietnamese

novel printed in Quốc Ngữ was published in 1925 whereas before that time periodicals had been the dominant form of publication. Near the beginning of World War II, with the restriction of political activity, the literary movement entered a decline; no great literary works were produced during the war.

Revolutionary Marxist literature also emerged during this pre-World War II period when the Communists published newspapers in Quốc Ngữ and French. An organization which helped spread literature in Quốc Ngữ was begun in 1938 and was called The Association for the Diffusion of Quốc Ngữ. It was set up because it was felt that Communist Party publications were not reaching all the peasants and workers and because of widespread illiteracy. The French tried to curtail its activities because they did not trust the organization.⁷ However, the Association for the Diffusion of Quốc Ngữ had at one time 50,000 students, and anti-illiteracy classes taught by intellectuals were widespread in both cities and towns (DeFrancis 1977: 216).

At the outbreak of World War II the Vietnamese educational system consisted of three years of elementary school, three years of primary school, four years of upper primary school, three years of secondary school and the option of higher education in Việt Nam or in France. In the first three grades education was in Vietnamese. After this, education was only for the elite and was completely in French. Vietnamese was taught as a subject. Of those in school, it was said that only ten percent continued beyond the first three years, and many left after the first or second year. Another author states that only one percent went on to secondary school. One can see that illiteracy was widespread when we consider that in 1939 only two or three percent of all Vietnamese children attended school (DeFrancis 1977: 217-218).

Concerning the education of Việt Nam's ethnic minority groups, the first efforts to set up schools for minorities were made by Catholic and Protestant missionaries from France. Protestants were of particular help in providing school books in the native languages. The only secondary schools for minorities were those run by missionaries.

with three exceptions: one French school in Ban Mêthuôt (Minority Rights Group 1974: 15), "the French School for Minorities" in Dalat, established near the close of French rule (Department of the Army 1972: 304-305); and one established in northern Tonkin in 1947 by the Việt Minh (Department of the Army 1972: 2-3). In 1939 only one superior primary school existed in Tonkin for all of the mountainous regions inhabited by minority groups. It was attended by 130 students, almost all of whom were members of the privileged families of the most prominent minority groups: The Tays, the Nùngs, the Muôngs and the Thais. Việt Nam did not produce even one minority university student in the entire colonial period.

The French made some attempt to teach spoken Vietnamese to the ethnic minorities and tried to spread Quốc Ngữ writing among the tribes, even among such tribes as the Nùng, who already possessed a script using Chinese characters. However, Quốc Ngữ was not widely diffused among minority peoples (Nguyễn, 1967: 130), and those who attended the schools were mainly the elite. Illiteracy was higher among the minorities than among the Việt (Nguyễn 1967: 116). The colonialists also tried to prepare an alphabet using Latin letters for the Tay, Nùng, Thai and Mèo peoples, among the most important minorities; however, these scripts had little success and soon fell into disuse. The French did attempt to teach the minorities in their native languages, as seen by the fact that they prepared a written script for the White Tai people in 1948⁸ and introduced it into the schools in the area as the medium of instruction.

Looking at the linguistic situation in Việt Nam in 1945, we see that although the French did have some measure of success, they were far from achieving their language policy goals. This was due in part to the disparity between the educational goals of successive administrators; no one was able to agree on the best solution to problems such as whether to begin education with Quốc Ngữ or French, when to introduce French in the schools, or which orthography to use.

The natives' attachment to Chinese due to their long exposure to Chinese culture forced the French to modify their plans and to proceed very cautiously in pursuing their original goal of producing a French-speaking elite class. Although the language policy was fluctuating and unstable and French teachers were often unavailable or of poor quality, the French did succeed in producing a small number of low-level, French-speaking functionaries to fill administrative positions. They also succeeded in virtually eliminating the Chinese language in Viet Nam, largely by dealing a blow to the centuries-old examination system.

The French still had far to go to achieve their aims. Quốc Ngữ was becoming accepted by many people in Việt Nam as a viable means of written expression; however, its use was still not widespread. It was only in the years after independence that it would become the basic medium of expression at all levels of education and would deserve the title of "national language."

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² Vietnamese is a tonal language. There are six tones, five of which are represented by a different symbol written over a word. The sixth is not a written symbol, but represents the lack of tone on a word.

³ Vietnamese administrative officials, called mandarins, were chosen through an examination system given in the Chinese language. This system originated in China. Those scoring the highest served under the Emperor in the Imperial Court; lower scores garnered positions in the army, schools, and other parts of society. Performance on the examination was the only criterion for appointing mandarins.

⁴ The education system used in French schools in Việt Nam consisted of three years of elementary school, followed by three years of primary school, four years of upper primary school and three years of secondary school.

⁵ Rough translation: Simplified or Pidgin French.

⁶ Governor General Beau opened the University when Phan Chu Trinh suggested that such a gesture would help promote collaboration between French and Vietnamese.

⁷ The White Tai live in the Red and Black River valleys in the northwestern region of North Việt Nam and speak a dialect of the Thai language heavily influenced by Chinese.

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